

TOUCHING AND OUR RELATION TO TOUCH

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Why this subject?

I realised, after having lived in different countries, meeting different people (mostly European), that our relationships towards others (humans or even our environment) start to be more and more rational, even the physical ones. Depending also on the culture or education of each country and individual, to touch and get in physical connection with one another seems sometimes difficult.

I feel that to know how to touch, to listen and respect the personal / private space, yours or somebody else's, is a huge deal for many and in my humble opinion the reason of many of our problems in society nowadays. Because of being so interested in this topic, I would like in my teaching to try and focus, and be aware of it. These days it is so easy to find on the internet how to do a trick or an explanation of different techniques. But sometimes we don't know, forgot or aren't aware about the principal meaning of listening to each other and basic touching.

I believe that circus and movement is a great tool to work on this "interacting and contact/ touching", trying to make ourselves more open to others and make a better world.

Thank you to Steven and Marjolein to find this interesting as well, and insist about to "touch" this topic in a session. I will just explain the exercises I have used in that session of 45 minutes, as a way to get in touch, feel each other and perhaps create some questions afterwards.

SESSION - 45 minutes

First exercise as warm-up - Activating body and connecting with ourselves

I played a song ("Nu Niar" by Kktar, 7'14") and told the participants to move around the space "moving and playing" with different parts of the body and feeling the rhythm of the music.

I started with the ankles and then climbed up along the joints. At the same time I was leading this each-everyone-personal-free-dance, I have played with them, doing the exercise the same time as a way to motivate them.

The dynamics and type of clues will be the same ones at every step on the list. We need to hold them and inflame them with a kind of sensation and part of the body they need to be aware and try to feel. One part of the body leads and the rest of it follows.

As coaches, we need to try and feel the correct timing of the group and each step of this dance, as some of the joints are easier parts to do movement research than others: for example the eyes or jaw are kind of difficult for some.

- Ankles - use all different ways to step on the floor with each foot: jumping, pointing, flexing, carefully, stronger, beating, caressing the floor, etc.
- Knees - they are now leading the movement, rotating and finding every weird axis or angle of movement, different levels/standing up/going to the floor.
- Hips - same as above - experimenting and looking for every possible movement, rotations, directions, textures, etc., with it.
- Chest - Same dynamics as before, all the way down.
- Shoulders
- Elbows
- Wrists
- Hands - every single finger
- Neck and head
- Jaw and mouth
- Eyes
- And everything together, completely free and open movement in every which way the participants want or feel, warming up, dancing on the music without being selfconscious.

NOTE

In my personal experience some students can have problems or be negative if you say straight away "We are going to dance" or "Let's do a warming-up dance". Some young people and many adults think they can't dance and get embarrassed. In this way, as a warm-up with clear tasks and then freedom in movement, I feel it is a nice way to get in to it without hardly noticing it.

Anyway, sometimes it will still be difficult depending on the group.

*Instead of as a warming-up, I used this exercise further on the classes, when the group is already more confident and open - having built a safe environment for learning and working together.

But I must say that on this special occasion the group was already "into it", as all of them were professionals on pedagogy and movement. This was our first physical session exchange of pedagogical methods in the afternoon of the first day, after we had been doing a short 10 minutes activating games lead by a colleague. That is why I started my session with this warm-up as a way to connect with our selves on the first place.

Exercise 2: Opening to the others

This is a traditional theatre warm-up game:

1. Walk around, crossing space in different directions, making eye contact with the others.
2. Find eye contact with someone and freeze, keeping this eye contact for a few seconds. Then break it and walk around again as before.
3. Try step 2, but freezing/stopping at different distances and different positions with your body or your body on the space in relation to the other: this could be in a radius that if extending your arm, you can touch each other. Try far away from the other, really close to each other, side by side, in front of each other, etc.

At this point it is interesting to talk about differences we are feeling in relation to this eye contact, depending on the guidelines.

Exercise 3: Running towards the wall

This exercise is, as the title says, about running towards the wall. If you have time, you can do it one by one first, then a few at the same time and after it, all together - if you have space enough to not bother each other while running.

NOTE: When you are running on your own the results and the feeling are more subtle and less obvious than with a bigger group.

Because of the large number of participants, I divided the group in two and because I didn't have a lot of time for the workshop, I directly did two long lines in front of the wall, at a 20 to 40 metres distance.

I let them get excited about it, like we're going to do a kind of physical test.

The task is to run as fast as you can towards the wall, getting as close as possible and in the last moment, stop, turn and freeze, standing straight and looking backwards to where you came from. At this point, I asked them if they felt anything in particular. Wait until all of them have done the exercise, clarify it and then do it again, focusing with the new sensation.

What I want them to feel while doing this race is not about physical control or high physical skills, even though of course we are working on that, neither about trust, self-confidence or fighting fears while running towards the danger. It is far easier than that. It is all about feeling the wind that is following as we are running. The more people are running at the same time, the more clear the sensation is.

My objective with this experiment is to be conscious about the energy we have as bodies, the power we have with our movement, and the consequences we create all around our selves without knowing it. And also about how strong we are together. Sometimes we are so concentrated about skills, competing each other or even just concentrated about wanting to do something right that we forget about the importance of the fact that each movement we do, even the tiny ones, have their reaction on the others, in our environment or even in the cosmos, if you want to say it in a more dramatical and spiritual way. The more presence as performers and strength as individuals we can produce if we are aware of it and perhaps notice also the responsibility implied. Many good men have said that with power comes a great responsibility, even Spiderman! XD

Exercise 4: Sats's principles

This is a classic listening exercise from theatre training - probably everyone knows some version of it already. I like to emphasize small details working with Sats from J. Grotowsky and E. Barba.

Sats is a Scandinavian word, meaning the impulse to do, the moment in which all energy is retained and calibrated, ready to execute an action. It is that moment of the cat just before it jumps on its prey. The cat has the right energy to do a precise movement to complete this action; not too much tension, not too relaxed, just enough, concentrated and ready for anything or everything.

The guideline for the dynamic is: everybody is walking around, in the same rhythm, evenly dividing the group in the space, being ready to react. Eyes awake and ready with a good contact with the others and the space, using peripheral vision. Good walking position, head up, straight back. More speed, bent the knees and lower the center (the Center/Hara/Dan tian, located two fingers under the belly button - our control point). Feet need to be silent, gently stroking the floor and using the entire sole to walk. Our legs must be fast and ready to find their way to be underneath our Center. No noise or as little as possible, even when jumping or falling to the floor!

Some signals we worked with:

- 1 clap = stop/freeze, walk again
- 2 claps = lie down on the floor
- verbal "Up" = Jump, both feet same time (as butterfly – no sound).

We try to provoke reactions with our movement and bodies without touching. We tease the others, we try to make them change directions, we follow someone closely, we jump in front, we try to catch their attention for a few seconds and keep walking. We "do" and we let the others "do" as well.

From this dynamics we went into a different thing of contact.

- Start walking without orders and make eye contact; we do this a few times until we get in touch with someone and we keep the eye contact going for some time. We move around the space and between the others without losing it. We find different levels, movements, contortions trying to hold it at all times. Try to be aware about the other couples, doing the same exercise and not to jump into them, even if you can't see them really well because you are trapped in your partner's eyes.

*We didn't have time to go further with this exercise because time was running out, but it is possible to add others. Here are a few more tips that are funny to work with, for example:

- Acrobatic tricks: with "Up" you can add jump twist, or pike, or grouped, straddle.
- Acrobatic static balance: during freezing time, handstands, headstand or hand balance with the knees on elbows, etc.
- "Aleya" - verbal signal: everyone run to do a huge hug all together in a big group.
- "J'arrive" - verbal signal - you can say also your own name: the person saying this raises up one arm and then slowly starts to fall forwards or backwards with both arms as if flying. Everybody runs to catch him/her before hurting him/herself by falling to the floor. This one is kind of scary and looks a tiny bit difficult but gives responsibility, adrenalin, emotion and so much fun!! People need to be smart and do it carefully.

NOTE: you can use every verbal signal, create a new one as a group, so you have your personal material made by all of you.

It is an exercise that can go really far (adding more theatre moments, difficulties, taking out the signals and doing everything with strong connection and listening). The objective is to move as one and get into a strong connection and concentration with a strong presence. To be there for yourself and for the others.

Exercise 5: The bottle with variation

Many people will know this exercise. It's a much used game for trust. I really like it and I find it's a really good game to learn how to approach, touch and find out more about safety of others. This variation I learned I found really interesting to work with as complementary to the original game working with my objectives about touching and feeling and come up with questions.

First variation:

- In small groups of approx. 8 people each. Make a circle with one person in the middle.
- The person in the middle must have feet together, straight legs, tight body and ankles relaxed. Like a stick but with relaxed ankles.
- People from the outside circle need to have good space between their feet, bent knees and good balance. It's advisable to lower the centre so you can be ready to take the weight of the "stick".
- Important: depending on cultural background and gender, this game could be adapted to the target group because of the risks of touching. What I usually do is to explain where it is easy to catch the body to prevent it from falling (shoulders and back), also because some girls can be uncomfortable about touching the chest. I advise to mention that if you don't feel comfortable with your arms alongside your body you can cross them in front of you (like an Egyptian mummy, with both palms on each shoulder).

Idea of the game:

- The person who is in the middle, the Stick, will start to lean forwards without moving the feet; they are like glued to the ground. The Stick will give his/her weight to the partners on the circle who will take care about his/her balance and bring it back into the place. Slowly the participants will take more control about the directions and the moves from the Stick having less and less time of pause in the middle as they are passing him from one partner to the other. Everyone needs to be involved and ready to catch and not let the body move to the floor. Participants need to be close enough to make sure that the Stick will not escape in between. They also need to be aware and ready to help partners on both sides in case it gets too heavy for them. This game is about cooperation and giving confidence to our friend in the middle that nothing bad will happen. You can play with how far you

can go and take the risk and how confident you can be and confidence you can give.

- Important: the movement has 3 stages:
 - one is reception when the body is falling towards you.
 - second the learning about the weight.
 - third when we give it back, always with care! It's a body and a friend. These "times" can be longer or short in timing, depending on the weight. The lower you get and the more weight you receive, the more difficult for the Stick and heavier for the circle player.

Second variation:

- Same principles as the first variation. Difference is that the movement will start from the people in the circle. They will push the person from the middle of the circle, away from them, more violently than before. Ofcourse being careful but with less care, pushing more kind of aggressively. Gentle hitting if that is possible. Be careful because it will get speedy quite fast and the sensations aren't pleasant.

After it you can ask them for feedback and explain about how much we can tell through the hands and the way of touching.

Arriving to the end of the session

I was supposed to do two games more before finishing the session with the last exercise but I had to skip them as I didn't have time enough for them.

I commented on observing and emphasized how our bodies are, like everything, full of maths and geometrics. The one that interested me at this point was "The Spiral" that you can find in every body, object or movement. I did a small demonstration about how through the spiral it is possible to move another body to make them do what we want them to do, by their different ways of spiraling.

I used as example the spiral inside the arm or the spiral in the space around the arm. This is a technique used in a more or less obvious way, like in martial arts such as Aikido or other disciplines like in dance movements. I usually work in couples or trios, investigating and searching these movements with one of them completely relaxed on the floor and the others learning about the possibilities of the body and general anatomy.

Last Exercise - Manipulexperimentation waking to 100% or Gemma's exercise :)

- Form groups of three
- Start music to help concentration and inspiration
- One from the group is lying on the floor completely relaxed and with closed eyes.

NOTE:

*I use two songs from Ludovico Einaudi. First: I Giorni (5min 57sec), and linked to this song I use: Lady Labyrinth (5min 43sec). In total is around 10/12 minutes exercise. Ofcourse you can use other songs or add some more to make it longer, but from my experience I can tell you it is quite a tiring exercise and around 12 minutes is a good time. Usually I don't do it two times in a row. (This also depends from the students' level).

*It's important to keep the eyes closed as much as you can, as blind dance. I do not like to use anything to obligate them to keep the eyes closed, because I think they feel secure when they can always open the eyes if they are afraid of something, so they can actually follow and fall trusting the two partners and this "free-movement game". Anyway, I strongly insist that it is worth a try to keep them closed much as they can.

- The other two from the group will start to play with "the body" giving impulses and moving each limb on their own and looking for different ways of movement. The person on the ground is not doing anything about it, neither resisting, neither following, just giving all the weight to both the 'caretakers'
- The dynamic will be that "The body" slowly wakes up and start to follow the impulses from the two "caretakers". The teacher will mention a percentage: 10%, 20%, 30%, etcetera, with time in between to develop the intensity of the impulses", making them longer and following them as they feel.

*Think about how 12 minutes is a really long time and you cannot arrive to the end so quickly. The person on the ground will start to follow the percentage and continuing the movement given by "the caretakers" making it tiny bit longer or just following it their commands.

- Really slowly the person on the floor will start to have more and more control on their own body. As "the caretakers" will pass from being creators and inspirators of the movement, to just followers and protectors from any danger around the blind player. Only in case "The body" needs help to feel it.
- At some point after a while with the "caretakers" being around, the "blind dancer" will be completely free to do whatever movement he/she wants to do.
- After having arrived at 100% and having been there for a good time, you can tell them to find slowly an end. A way to bring all this energy together and go for calming down and stop.

Small recap

I finished the session with a small chat giving the option to ask questions, talking about my doubts and interests, ask for their thoughts and how they felt during the session, did they find something interesting or new, etc.

Small personal recap

You can give time to do a personal recap on how do I use touch, how do I feel and how do I approach others, how do I feel when I touch people and what if they don't want me to?

The Cat and The Mouse

Everybody is in a circle (the Dogs), protecting two people in the middle. One will be The Cat and T the other will be The Mouse. Both have their eyes closed.

The Cat should listen and make noises as a cat trying to catch the mouse; and The Mouse needs to be silent as a mouse and move quietly trying to avoid the cat.

The Dogs must be completely silent so the cat and the mouse can feel each other. Only in case they are going to far out of the circle, The Dogs can whisper like a bark, to steer them. (But then the cat will also be aware about the zone where it came from.)

If it takes too long, the Dogs can reduce the circle slowly.

You can put in more than one mouse, two or three, or even more with more cats! It gets really funny!!!

Hope you will enjoy it! ;) Let's play!!